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TWO ABORIGINAL SHELTERS IN SOUTHWESTERN QUEENSLAND

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ABSTRACT

Two dome-shaped shelters made of Gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*) by Aborigines, post-European contact, have been found in southwestern Queensland. Shelter 1 is in good condition. From this the general sequence of construction can be established.

Shelter 2 is similar, but in poor condition. Such shelters are important and should be preserved.

INTRODUCTION

Few aboriginal shelters can be seen in areas of Queensland where Aborigines no longer make or use such shelters. Despite their ephemeral appearance and the short term usage envisaged by their builders, some shelters can still be found in remote parts of southwestern Queensland where the dry climate and isolation have retarded processes of decay and destruction. Age, frail construction, and general lack of protective measures afforded these structures makes detailed description of them necessary if data about site location, site use, dwelling construction and Aboriginal history is to be recorded and preserved.

Two previously unrecorded shelters were examined by one of us (E.D.) in mid 1982 in the Birdsville area. These are reported here. Further information is held in the Queensland Museum, and the Archaeology Branch Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement.

THE SITE

The shelters are situated approximately 85 m apart, 100 m up a gentle slope from a seasonal drainage line which, during floods, forms part of the Diamantina River Channels. The general area is treeless, lightly grassed, 'undulating stony downs' (Dawson 1974). Stands of Gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*) grow along the drainage line. The nearest permanent water to the site is at Nerathella Waterhole, 3.5 km to the north. No artefacts were observed near either shelter.

SHELTER 1 (Pl. 1, Fig. 1)

The shelter lies on a small mound. It was based on four forked interlocking branches (Fig. 1, a, b, c, d), presumably from the nearby *Acacia cambagei* stand.

The frame of the dome-shaped shelter was formed by burying the stout ends of four forked branches (Fig. 1, a, b, c, d) in the ground. Three of these branches are long, and curved. These (Fig. 1 a, c, d) interlocked. A 'ridge pole' (Fig. 1e) was placed from the remaining structural branch which is short, straight and stout, (Fig. 1b) to rest near the top of the 'dome' formed by the interlocking branches. (Fig. 1 a, c, d). The stoutest of the main supports has a maximum diameter of 16 cm. Diameter of the most slender structural branch is 7 cm. The basic frame was overlaid with curved branches (of diameters varying between 3 cm and 15 cm). The butt ends of these non-structural branches were also buried in the earth. The entrance (Fig. 1) faces east. All branches used were cut by metal axes (Pl. 3c). This shelter is in good condition generally, although some of the small, lighter, lateral 'wall liners' have collapsed and now lie at random round the base. Charcoal fragments indicating the former fire place, lie 4.5 m from the shelter entrance.

SHELTER 2 (Pl. 2b)

This is very similar to shelter 1, but is less well preserved. Only one main structural support branch and the 'ridge pole' are still upright. All the curved 'wall' timbers have collapsed and lie within 4 m of the standing support branch. A fireplace consisting of charcoal and baked clay was located 8.0 metres from the former entrance.

DISCUSSION

There are no known station records, published accounts, or archival material on these shelters.

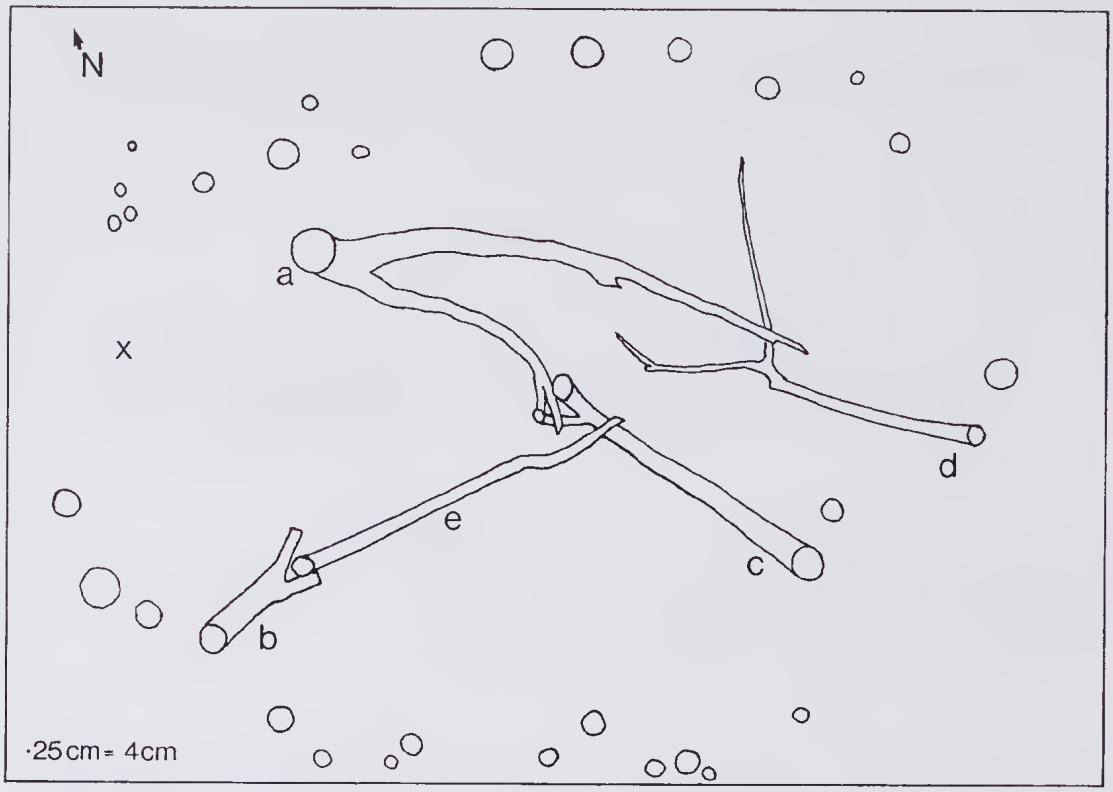

FIGURE 1. Plan of shelter 1 showing position and size of structural and other branches. Main structural branches are drawn in full. Position of embedded ends of other branches are indicated by open circles. Entrance (X).

Metal axe cuts (Pl. 3c) on all timbers indicate that the shelters were constructed after European settlement (i.e. at least since the 1870's). Local opinion suggests the shelters were probably constructed at a temporary camp site by shepherds when floods restricted movement (J. Evans, pers. comm.).

Shelters such as these are important for two reasons: Firstly, they may be seen as historical documents of recent Aboriginal occupation for which few written records exist (e.g. Duncan-Kemp 1933, 1964; Robins 1981). As tangible evocative evidence of Aboriginal occupation they may become a focal point for folk sentiment. Secondly, they offer archaeological evidence for such factors as technology, site location, campsite size and seasonality. Such evidence may assist in the formulation of models of Aboriginal settlement and subsistance. Although this evidence may not be able to be applied in the form of direct analogy to prehistoric archaeological evidence it may help explain anomalies observed in the archaeological record in other areas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jim Evans of Durrie Station and Genevieve and Ashley Daley of Mt. Leonard provided information on the shelters and on early history of the area. One plant specimen was identified by the Government Botanist. Jeanette Covacevich (Queensland Museum) assisted in preparing the manuscript. Plates were prepared with the assistance of Maureen Kelly and David Bligh (Queensland Museum).

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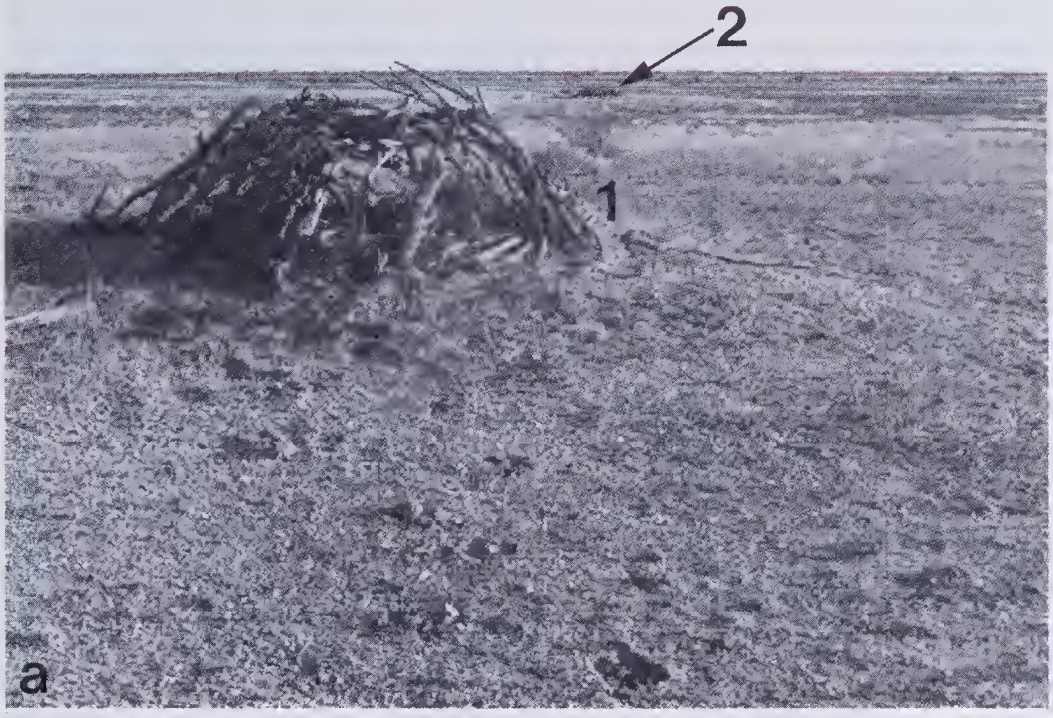
PLATE 1

Aboriginal shelters near Birdsville, SE.Q.

a) Shelter 1 and Shelter 2, 85 m apart in undulating, stony downs.
b) Shelter 1 showing size and general appearance.


2
1
a


b

PLATE 2

General appearance of the shelters.

a) Shelter 1
b) Shelter 2


a
b

PLATE 3

Detail of Shelter 1

a) Entrance
b) Structural detail near the entrance. One of the main structural branches (Fig. 1b) and the 'ridge pole' (Fig. 1e) can be seen slightly to the right of centre.
c) Metal axe cut Gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*) ends.


a
b
c